



CHOOSE YOUR ADVENTURE

A DOZEN
DESTINATIONS
FOR MEMORABLE
WILDLIFE
WATCHING

BY RUTHANNE JOHNSON

 **+ IPAD EXTRA:** Elephant seals,
bison, hawks and more: Check out six
more wildlife-watching hot spots.



You're out for a walk in the woods. You turn a bend in the trail, and there stands a majestic deer. Or maybe there's a bobcat, disappearing into the thicket.

When it comes to these unexpected animal sightings, even the briefest moments are awe-inspiring. That's why wildlife-watching vacations are so popular. Not only are they great ways to escape the hustle and bustle of everyday life, they regenerate the soul.

Right here in the good old U.S. of A., there's a dazzling array of habitats and wildlife just waiting to be enjoyed. From watching grizzly bears in Alaska to seeing manatees in Florida, here are a dozen adventures that offer some of the most amazing wildlife experiences on earth. The destinations we've chosen are affordable, accessible and conservation-minded.

So safe travels. And don't forget the binoculars!



Twinkle, Twinkle Little Firefly

Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee

BEST TIME TO VISIT: *Late May to early June*

INSIDER TIP: *Lowlight photography requires a tripod, wide aperture and high ISO setting to allow in more light.*

Imagine sitting in a chair in the woods. It's pitch black and there are hundreds of people there. But it's quiet. Thousands of yellow-green lights flash all around and then stop simultaneously, plunging you back into darkness. The show continues for several hours. Lights on. Lights off. Lights on.

The synchronous species of fireflies (*Photinus carolinus*) illuminates the night for about two weeks every year near the park's Elkmont campground. This phenomenon occurs in just a few places in the world, says park entomologist Rebecca Nichols.

It's the firefly's mating ritual. Males flash while flying to attract females perched near the ground. After mating, the female wiggles her abdomen into the soft earth beneath the leaf litter and lays her eggs. Park scientists begin monitoring soil temperatures in March to estimate the timing of the next generation's emergence. Once calculations are complete in early April, they post event dates on their website. Tickets sell out fast.

"It's not something you expect would ever exist in the world," says Seattle photographer Floris van Breugel, who camped about four miles into the forest with a friend. "It was like this silent disco, being surrounded by the mating dance of these little insects."

Photographer Radim Schreiber has seen lots of fireflies at home in Iowa, but nothing like this. "There were fireflies 360 degrees around me, and I felt like I was part of them."

On the Wings of Sandhill Cranes and Snow Geese

Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, New Mexico

BEST TIME TO GO: *Early November to mid-February*

INSIDER TIP: *Go during a full moon for silhouette shots.*

Serious birders and wildlife photographers know this refuge as one of the preeminent sites to view migratory birds in the country. Nestled

between the Chupadera and San Pascual mountains, the refuge encompasses a wild stretch of nearly 60,000 acres along the Rio Grande. From distant mesas, a lush ribbon of cottonwood trees and willows stands out against arid surroundings.

In late fall and early winter, the refuge transforms into an airport stopover of sorts for tens of thousands of sandhill cranes and snow geese migrating south for the winter.



They feed in the surrounding fields by day and paddle the wetlands by night. In one week last November, 50,000 geese and 15,000 cranes were counted. It's something to see them all lift from the water, as they head for breakfast.

One late November, amateur photographer Francoise Macomber drove the dirt road into the park before sunrise, her headlights revealing layer upon layer of birds on the water. The scene turned magical as the pre-dawn glow illuminated a wintry mist hanging over the wetlands. At first light, the sandhill cranes launched in breathtaking unison. Then the snow geese took flight.

"You can never be the same after feeling the breeze from the wings of these majestic creatures," she says. "Bosque has a power. It draws you in and remains with you forever."

❖ Bear Mecca

Brooks Camp, Katmai National Park, Alaska

BEST TIME TO VISIT:

July and September

INSIDER TIP: *Campsites and cabins book quickly each*

January. Check [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov) and [katmailand.com](https://www.katmailand.com) for more info.

When visitors see their first grizzly at Brooks Camp, they begin to understand the raw power of these animals. So it was for photographer Ed MacKerrow as his float plane landed on nearby Naknek Lake: "I looked out the window and there on the beach was this huge grizzly running on the shore. Then he turned, started swimming in the water and caught a fish. This guy was like a dump truck



that moved like an Indy car."

For about two months every summer, dozens of grizzlies head to Brooks River to feast on salmon. A small area has been carved out for tourists, complete with a lodge, cafeteria, cabins and a campground surrounded by an electrified fence. Forested trails lead visitors to viewing platforms overlooking bruin hotspots. One word of caution: Keep alert, as you may be sharing the trails with bears.

In July, visitors can watch bears fishing daily in Brooks Falls. In one spot called the "jacuzzi," bears will sit for hours grabbing unlucky fish. It's not unusual to see mothers with their cubs and brouahas over favored fishing holes. You can watch the sunset for hours, MacKerrow says. One year, a wolf showed up to partake in the bounty.

In September, the bears

return to feast on dying fish after they've spawned. Notes Michael Fitz, with Katmai National Park: "[They] will cruise up and down the river like battleships, looking for anything that can't swim away."

Where Sea Turtles Nest

Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge, Florida

BEST TIME TO VISIT:

June to July

INSIDER TIP: *On dark nights, include a kayaking tour of nearby Indian River Lagoon to see glimmers of bioluminescent marine creatures.*

There's a 20-mile stretch of beach in Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge that's been dubbed the most important nesting ground in the Western Hemisphere for loggerhead turtles and in North America

for green turtles.

Nest numbers reach somewhere between 15,000 and 20,000 annually, with as many as 1,000 recorded over a single mile. "It is the most densely nested beach in Florida and possibly the world," says Nichole Perna, assistant land manager for the refuge.

In June and July, the barrier-island refuge offers nighttime tours to see nesting loggerheads. Reservations are required, and only small groups are allowed to ensure minimal disturbance. While visitors listen to a sea turtle program, scouts patrol the beach for nesting loggerheads, weighing up to 300 pounds. The group can then watch the female lay her eggs.

In August and September, guests can watch volunteers excavate hatched sea turtle nests. Straggler hatchlings are often found and released.

Howling Wolves

Yellowstone National
Park, Wyoming

BEST TIME TO VISIT:

January to mid-March

INSIDER TIP: Book at least one day with a wolf-watching guide. They'll know where the wolves are.

Seeing wild wolves for the first time can be an emotional experience, sometimes even moving people to tears. "They're beautiful, with intense, gold eyes," says wolf biologist and guide Nathan Varley. "They're 120 pounds of wild canine."

It's also hard not to think about their enduring struggle—how they were systematically extirpated from nearly every state, and how that struggle to maintain a foothold continues.

But Yellowstone wolves are protected, and the park has become a special place for watching them—especially in winter, when the throngs of people have thinned and the packs become more cohesive.

In winter, steam rises from hot springs and icicles hang from bison's furry faces. The snow and cold drive elk and bison into the valley bottoms, which flank the roads. "The animals cluster together in big herds and the [wolves] follow them," Varley says. Against the glistening white, wolves stand out.

Winter is also when alpha males and females court and breed. Couples nuzzle and groom each another. And there are meet-ups between enamored wolves from different packs. "Those meetings are pretty sweet," Varley says. There's a lot of fancy footwork and tail-wagging. Sometimes, one rests a chin or paw on the other's shoulder.

The best wolf-watching happens in early morning and at dusk, when packs are most active. If you're lucky, you'll hear them howl, an especially stirring experience in winter when they harmonize together on one prevailing note.



Where the Wild Ponies Roam

Assateague Island National
Seashore, Maryland

BEST TIME TO VISIT:

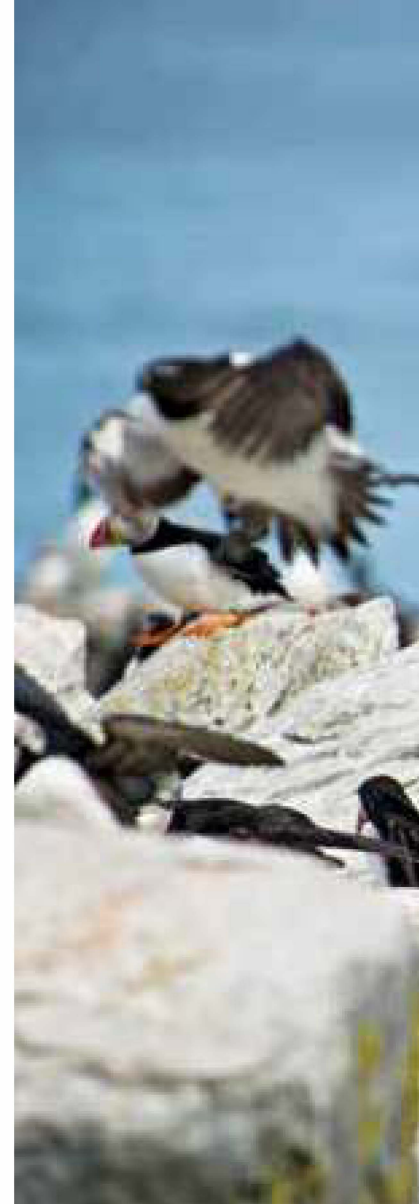
Summer

INSIDER TIP: Beachside campers should note that over-sand vehicles are allowed on the beach during the day.

What's better than beach camping—sunning and swimming in the ocean by day and lounging alongside campfires by night? Well, Assateague Island adds yet another dimension: wild ponies.

The 100 or so living on the Maryland side of the island are descendants of forgotten and abandoned livestock once owned by colonists. Their brown and white pinto colorings against the sand, deep blue water and marsh grasses create scenes artists and photographers dream about. "I hear over and over again from visitors that it's been a childhood dream to see the ponies," says park biological technician Allison Turner. Horses sometimes wander through the 350-site campground near the park entrance.

But it's the backcountry camping that allows the most unique wildlife experiences, as the island is also home to a variety of birds, including sandpipers and peregrine falcons. Visitors can hike or kayak to several primitive campsites along the east and west shorelines. Along the way, they may see horses grazing near egrets in the salt marshes, or stallions fighting. They may see ponies cooling off in the sand or, on rare occasions, allowing the surf to wash the biting flies off their backs.



Zen of the Manatee

Blue Spring State Park, Florida

BEST TIME TO VISIT:

December to February

INSIDER TIP: Although it's Florida, dress for potentially cooler temperatures.

More than 6,000 West Indian manatees live in Florida's waters. And when water temperatures drop below 60, the gentle giants head in droves to the state's many warm springs and power-plant discharge basins. It's during these cold snaps that people can see large numbers of manatees, suspended in blue-green waters, surfacing occasionally to gulp air before



sinking to warmer currents.

At Blue Spring State Park, it's not unusual to find more than 400 manatees hanging out in the spring and the ½-mile run that flows to the St. Johns River.

During high season, mothers, calves and juveniles feed in the river and then come to sleep and warm up in the spring. You might see nursing mothers, calves barrel-rolling in play, even 1,200-pound adult males. A boardwalk with viewing platforms borders the run and partway encircles the clear-water spring.

If you arrive early, you may even see former park ranger Wayne Hartley out counting

manatees. "Sometimes, they'll bump and push around my canoe," he says, with a chuckle. "I've had them roll on their back and rub their belly on the canoe, too."

Puffin Stuff

Machias Seal Island, Maine

BEST TIME TO VISIT:

Mid-June to early August

INSIDER TIP: *Travel to the island depends on weather and sea conditions. Plan on staying near Cutler Harbor for a few days in case of cancellation.*

Machias Seal Island has two claims to fame: It boasts one of the last manned lighthouses in

North America and the largest, most southerly colony of Atlantic puffins, with 4,000-plus nesting there each summer.

Puffins are charismatic birds, with their tuxedo-colored bodies, boldly striped bills and orange legs and feet. After wintering in the open North Atlantic, they start arriving on the 20-acre island in April to nest in cracks and crevices along the rocky shoreline. The island is their historic nesting ground, says Andrew Patterson, who captains one of only two boats allowed to take visitors to the island.

Depending on the month, observers can watch newly

arrived puffins looking for old nesting sites or creating new ones. Males and females rub their bills together and preen in courtship. In mid-June, eggs start to hatch. "That's when things really ratchet up," Patterson says. Parents fly in with herring-sized fish lined neatly in their bills before ducking into their nests. Small groups of people can view puffins from blinds situated near nesting sites. Puffins often land on the blind's roof or near the windows. "It's truly one of those singular, PBS nature-type experiences," Patterson says. "You feel like an extra in the movie."



To the Bat Cave

Bracken Cave,
Comal County, Texas

BEST TIME TO VISIT:

July to August

INSIDER TIP: *Tours are free for Bat Conservation International members, with limited dates open to the public.*

It is quite a sight: Twenty million bats returning home in the early morning hours, diving down from the sky at about 40 miles an hour. They make a whistling sound as they

pop their wings to brake at the entrance of Bracken Cave.

Mexican free-tailed bats spend summers in the historic cave, migrating there every March from South America and Mexico. The cave is about 1,170 feet high and 100 feet across the floor, with up to 500 bats hanging per square foot.

The massive colony has been using the cave for about 10,000 years, says Fran Hutchins, director of Bracken Cave Preserve. Guano on the cave floor is nearly 60 feet thick

and crawling with its own microsystem, including flesh-eating beetles. The area is protected by Bat Conservation International, which offers limited tours at dusk and a few summer campouts to catch the morning fly-in.

The evening emergence takes roughly four hours, as bats drop from their roost to form a flying vortex. The tornado swirls from the entrance to the tree line and then spreads into a river of flitting, flying mammals.

Outside the cave, hawks, falcons, even ground predators gather for the chance to snatch at a meal.

Whales Ahoy!

Monterey Bay, California

BEST TIME TO VISIT:

Year-round

INSIDER TIP: *Visit gowhales.com for a list of recent sightings to help plan your trip.*

For anyone even remotely interested in whales, a trip to

Monterey Bay is a must. Whale watching there is a year-round affair. Several whale species migrate along the coast and feed in the area at different times of the year, often coming close to shore because of a deep canyon near the coastline.

The bay is also smack in the middle of Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary—often referred to as the Serengeti of the Sea. The area supports large plankton blooms, which in turn support krill, anchovies and squid. The copious food attracts an abundance of animals, from whales and sea lions to dolphins, sea otters and seabirds.

Each December, gray whales begin migrating south from their feeding grounds in the Bering Sea to coastal waters in Baja, where they'll spend calving season. Peak numbers hit Monterey around mid-January for the southward journey and mid-March as they return north with their newborns.

Humpbacks are also common from late April to December. They're gregarious and exciting to watch, says Kathy Luis, who often goes on outings with Monterey Bay Whale Watch. She's seen it all: humpbacks breaching; visitors being sprayed with water from exhaled air; whales bobbing perpendicular in a feat called spy hopping.

Sometimes, whales curiously approach the boat. "Having an eye-to-eye encounter with a creature that size is mind-boggling," she says. "Their beauty and grace, moving through the water so effortlessly. ... I never get tired of seeing them."

Flight of the Warblers

Magee Marsh Wildlife Area, Ohio

BEST TIME TO VISIT:

Second week in May

INSIDER TIP: Sign up for

"The Biggest Week in American Birding" festival, offering tours, presentations and evening socials.

Warblers are colorful little songbirds who overwinter throughout Central and South America, then migrate great distances each spring to nest in the boreal forests of Canada and beyond. They live dispersed throughout most of their life cycle. But each spring, they amass in special places along their migration routes to rest and eat. Magee Marsh is one of those places—and an exceptional one at that.

Thousands upon thousands of warblers stop over at the marsh before their long flight across Lake Erie. They start arriving in April, and by May the floodgates have opened, says Kimberly Kaufman, executive director of Black Swamp Bird Observatory. "We have so many that people say it's like they're dripping from the trees." They've even been known to occasionally land on a tourist's head or camera lens.

Warblers are typically difficult-to-spot treetop birds. But at the marsh they fly at chest level or lower to feed on semi-aquatic insects called midges. A mile-long boardwalk transects the 2,200-acre habitat, taking visitors into forested areas yet to bear leaves. It's here that the tiny, flamboyantly colored birds stand out. "Warblers have an amazing palette," Kaufman says, "from these bright yellow dabs of sunlight to flaming orange, deep blue and green."

And because it's near breeding season, males are singing.

"That added chorus ... creates a truly spectacular experience for people."

Beautiful Like a Fox

Santa Cruz Island, Channel Islands National Park, California

BEST TIME TO VISIT:

December through April

INSIDER TIP: You can

take day trips or camp on the island. Some kayak outfitters can provide camping supplies.

The Channel Islands are often likened to the Galapagos, in that their isolated existence has allowed the evolution of nearly 150 unique species. Santa Cruz Island hosts 60 of them, including the island fox, island spotted skunk and island jay.

A 60-minute ferry ride from Ventura Harbor, the 61,000-acre island has some of the most unique wildlife-watching opportunities around. Kayakers can paddle through sea caves and watch as sea lions frolic

through kelp beds. They'll see a variety of seabirds perched atop rocks protruding from the water.

On land, island foxes frequent the Scorpion Ranch campground, a short walk from the ferry dock. The size of a house cat, they're one of the world's smallest foxes, and restorative efforts have saved the species from extinction.

The foxes are active during the day and frequently seen in the campgrounds and along trails in Scorpion Canyon.

Photographer Tim Hauf likes to watch wildlife along the trails, where he's had many run-ins with foxes. A short hike to Cavern Point takes you to the island's best overlook, he says, where you can watch peregrine falcons riding the thermals and whales migrating along the coast at certain times of year. Even foggy days can be spectacular, as ravens and peregrines emerge from the opaque white like spirits from another dimension.

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